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University and the Humanities: Current Challenges

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The institution of the University has been going through a process of intense change and evolution in its mission and objectives in these first decades of the twenty-first century, and even during the final decades of the twentieth century. Six years ago, in Australia, the firm Ernst & Young published a report titled *University of the Future: A Thousand Year Old Industry on the Cusp of Profound Change.* The authors of this report identified three types of universities: 1) those maintaining the status quo, though updating their mission ("streamlined status quo"); 2) those filling a specific niche in the market ("niche dominators"); and 3) those which are transforming the university ("transformers").

The first group, those termed "streamlined status quo," are the established universities, some of which boast hundreds of years of history. These preserve their pedagogical and research traditions, though they are gradually transforming and updating the service and administration models of their institution. This evolution naturally implies changes in the manner in which these universities interact with students, governments, key players in industry, secondary schools, and the community.

[1] This text, translated from Spanish, was the inaugural lecture of the academic year 2018-19, delivered at the University of Alcalá on September 10, 2018. Even though a few stylistic changes have been made, and a brief list of works cited was added, I have preferred to keep its original oral style.

The second group, the "niche dominators," includes both established universities as well as new institutions. As their name suggests, the purpose of these institutions is fundamentally to reshape and refine their "portfolio of services" and the markets in which they operate. They focus their attention on specific "client groups" by offering a customized education and operating similarly with research and research-related services. This customization, in turn, leads these institutions to modify their business, organizational, and operational models. The terms "portfolio of services," "market," "client group," and "business model" are significant.

The third group of universities is that of the "transformers," comprised of new, private institutions who are creating a position for themselves in the, shall we say, "traditional" sector and creating new market avenues. They are thus fusing aspects of the higher education sector with other sectors, such as the media, technology, innovation, and venture capital, among others. This

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leads to the creation of new markets, new areas, and new sources of economic value, which in turn increases the benefit derived from investing in the central business: namely teaching and research that are internationally competitive.

I believe that all of us here today are aware that this, to phrase it simply and in few words, is the current situation in which universities around the world find themselves. The emergence of new institutions, especially of this last group, the "transformers," is changing the relationship between universities and society, both in the public and private spheres. This is what ultimately produces the changes that established universities, those that are historic and traditional, and even those with less than half a century of existence, are currently experiencing. The appearance in this same period of numerous university rankings and the importance they are given by the media, governments, and employers, is one more example of the wave of innovation which is affecting universities around the world and which is used to justify the launch of new educational businesses, each more closely linked to specific business sectors and industries.

In addition to this phenomenon, we also observe the growing importance in the educational agenda of curricular innovations, including life-long learning and the new digital technologies, in higher education as well as at other educational levels. Both life-long learning and the inclusion of digital technologies are clearly a response to the new challenges posed by the constantly changing conditions of the job market. National governments and supra-national

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entities, such as the European Commission, foster this innovation and support it, as reflected in their calls for projects. On May 30, 2017, the Renewed EU Agenda for Higher Education, as a follow-up to the 2011 Modernisation Agenda, was presented. It falls within this framework, supporting the changes I have just described and facilitating a more direct relationship between universities and industry. One such example is the promotion of industrial doctorates within a new model for Doctoral Programs. These are modifications which, to my understanding, strengthen universities and contribute to their efficacy in providing the service they are expected to provide to society. Thus, in my opinion, these changes should be welcomed.

Nonetheless, we cannot ignore the negative reactions to this innovating trend that are beginning to manifest within the university. The European University Association (EUA) published a statement in July 2017 titled "EUA's Response to the Renewed EU Agenda for Higher Education," in which the EUA essentially welcomed these innovations, while also warning against the inherent risks involved in adopting some of them. Among the topics discussed, for example, the EUA was reticent as regards the transformation of STEM to STEAM, by the simple addition of A (for "Arts") into the quartet of subjects considered to be fundamental in education (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math). To quote, "EUA is also convinced that STEAM…is not an adequate concept to include the unique contributions of arts, humanities, and social sciences. EUA would prefer to see greater recognition of the value of a diverse disciplinary and interdisciplinary landscape, including small and rare disciplines" (p. 2). In another section discussing research, the EUA also expressed its reservations as to the EU's market orientation in its innovations: "Translating research outcomes into marketable innovations is only one of the outcomes of research activity; the contribution of university research to innovation goes well beyond this, as it generates societal well-being of an economic, social, educational and cultural nature, with long-term benefits for social welfare" (p. 3).

This declaration by the EUA cannot go without notice as it reflects the common position held by the hundreds of European universities that this association represents. The underlying purpose of the EUA is for European universities to acquire a dimension that will differentiate them from universities in other regions of the world, in particular North America and Asia. If we consider the positions universities from these regions hold in international rankings, generally better than the vast majority of European universities, it becomes easy to understand the reticence displayed by some of the world's oldest universities to assimilate to or directly replicate the North American and Asian models.

I could provide myriad examples of others who share this same perspective, though in the interest of time I will not do so in depth. Allow me, however, to at least mention five books on this topic from the past twenty years. The first two are *Cultivating Humanity. A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (1997) and *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (2010) by the American philosopher Martha Nussbaum. The next ones are *La utilidad de lo inútil: Manifiesto* (2013) by the Italian professor and philosopher Nuccio Ordine; and *Adiós a la Universidad: El eclipse de las Humanidades* (2011), and *La luz de los faros. Una defensa apasionada de las Humanidades* (2017), authored by the Spaniards Jordi Llovet and Carlos García Gual respectively.

Nowadays we live in a technological society, or a "technologized" one, if you prefer. Science and Technology dominate our society more than ever before, and they have provided us with a level of well-being and comfort so far unknown in history. Science is the source of knowledge, and knowledge today is more accessible than ever thanks to technological innovations. However, while this is true and is a great advantage with respect to our past, it is equally true that obscurantism and the manipulation of the truth has seized our present. We are all too familiar with the phenomenon of "fake news" and the concept of "post-truth" and the inherent risks these pose to understanding and democracy. The institution of the University should do something to combat this plague that has caused catastrophes in western democracies, catastrophes about which more evidence is revealed every day.

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Yet in addition to the ease with which "fake news" is disseminated through the social and news media, leading to the manipulation of citizens' wishes, we have also observed, for years, the advance of machines, which at times seem to threaten to replace humankind. With robots, cyborgs, androids, and other similar technological manifestations, some are already using the term "post-human" to define our current technological civilization. And I am not referring to science fiction, I am referring to a reality that draws closer every day.

The role that robots play in our society, for example, led the European Parliament to approve an initiative last year urging the European Commission to develop a proposal for a directive on robots and artificial intelligence. The impact that robots are having on our economy, scientific research, security, data protection, and, of course, on people is evident. There are questions that should be at the center of university debate: questions such as the ethical, legal, economic, social, and pedagogic consequences of robots and artificial intelligence systems in the production of goods and services, including preventative medical care. How should we regulate, for example, driverless cars or the employment of androids to care for the elderly, complete household tasks, or

provide company? Do these androids have labor rights? How can we face up to the likely loss of human employment due to the progressive automation of myriad productive processes? Should these non-human entities (or their owners) pay taxes and contribute to social security in order to contribute to social benefits policies such as unemployment and pensions?

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Furthermore, we must define deontological questions within research and in the development of this sector. Think of the impact that bioengineering or genetic engineering might have on our lives, which they already do, in fact. Consider for a moment the ethical limitations of the "technologicalization," if you will, of health and medical research… There are two novels from this century that I would like to mention in this respect, as they allow us to question, from a human perspective, these post-human phenomena. The first, published in 2005, is titled *Never Let Me Go*, by Kazuo Ishiguro, the Japan-born British writer who was honored with the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2017. The other, published in 2015, *The Heart Goes Last*, is a work published by the Canadian author Margaret Atwood, well-known for her *The Handmaid's Tale*, published in 1985, which has recently been adapted into a television series.

Ishiguro's novel examines the ethical dilemma of a group of human beings created by genetic engineering to serve as entities with therapeutic ends. This is to say they were created to serve as organ donors for transplants. These beings, which are completely human, have feelings and perceptions that do not appear to be compatible with the destiny that they face. The reader must eventually ask him or herself how far bioengineering may be allowed to go. Is it ethical for these people to exist only to serve an ancillary purpose?

Analogously, in the more recent novel by Margaret Atwood, the protagonist couple faces existence in a society dominated by a group that controls – or pretends to control –creation and reproduction, and even human feelings. There are clones, there are injections to erase memories, to make lives disposable, etc. As in Ishiguro's novel, *The Heart Goes Last* by Margaret Atwood presents us with the challenge of living in peace and prosperity, of having access to a world which is more

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comfortable, supposedly happy, and technologically advanced. Yet, in the end, the deep-seated issues that subsist in our societies arise in the novel, from global and globalized terror, to the catastrophe that is climate change, to the multiple effects of the technological era.

Above all else, however, it is necessary for the University to consider what it can do. Which disciplines could contribute to the creation of a just post-human policy – a policy that responds appropriately to these challenges and that includes a global, multi-species perspective. It seems clear that the models of universities that I mentioned at the beginning (the "streamlined status quo," the "niche dominators," and the "transformers") are not the answer due to their focus on markets, on industry and innovation, on the attainment of economic benefit, etcetera.

I believe that the response to these challenges can be found in the Humanities, the Social Sciences, Political Theory, Mathematics, and Physics; those subjects which Aristotle believed should ultimately comprise the education of human beings. Humanism, in this sense, is to view the world from the perspective of humankind, or "man" (ἄνθρωπος, in the Greek sense of the word; let us remember Protagoras' famous *dictum*, πάντων χρημάτων μέτρον ἔστὶν ἄνθρωπος, "man is the measure of all things"). That is to say, these humanistic disciplines are those that can lead to scientific understanding and technical solutions, and do not pursue an economic or merely technological goal, which is why they may sometimes be called "useless" or "non-utilitarian."

Let us agree that these disciplines, these Humanities in the classical and wider sense of the word (which must include, as I said, the Mathematical Sciences and Physics), are those which allow us to exercise our criticism of cultures and techno-scientific hegemonies, as well as address the sustainability and post-humanization problems of technological society. This is due to the fact that History, for example, has given us access to knowledge of the past, and with it humankind can develop a sense of roots, evolution, and foresight. Philosophy and Letters provide us with control of language and logic and with the accompanying ability to develop opinions and express them cogently, so as to be able to communicate with others. Of Mathematics, Physics, and Biology Abraham Flexner already wrote almost eighty years ago, in 1939, in an article titled "The Usefulness of Useless Knowledge" (*Harper's Magazine*, October 1939, pp. 544-552), which contains a passionate defense of knowledge for knowledge's sake, beyond any application or practical benefit, and which has been incorporated as an appendix to Nuccio Ordine's previously-cited book, *La utilidad de lo inútil: Manifiesto* (2013).

Martha Nussbaum, the American philosopher I mentioned earlier, winner of the 2012 Prince of Asturias Award in Social Sciences, has been writing about these issues, especially as relates to democracy. Nussbaum has worked closely with Amartya Sen, winner of the Nobel Prize in Economics, on topics that involve development and ethics, in her case from what is generally described as an "Aristotelian" perspective, as Martha Nussbaum places particular emphasis on humans' social and political nature (the Greek "ζῷον πολῑτῐκόν"). If I mention this now, it is to return to the argument I presented earlier about the risk to democracy and our civilization if we set aside the Humanities. How can we fight and defeat "fake news," populism, the manipulation of the truth, or the rampant insensibility of a society that is increasingly unsupportive and paralyzed in the face of humanity's grave problems?

From the beginning, this philosopher has sent a clear message against the economicism and utilitarianism of our society and our science. She writes, "Thirsty for national profit, nations, and their systems of education, are heedlessly discarding skills that are needed to keep democracies alive. If this trend continues, nations all over the world will soon be producing generations of useful machines, rather than complete citizens who can think for themselves, criticize tradition, and understand the significance of another person's sufferings and achievements. The future of the world's democracies hangs in the balance" (p. 16).

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As you can see, Nussbaum points to the ability to think critically and comprehend others' achievements and suffering. This should be valued in our citizenry as the characteristics that make us truly humans and humanists. We cannot be unfeeling to the constant suffering we see repeated day after day in our news broadcasts, that of so many human beings who go hungry, who are persecuted for their ideas or ideological positions, or who simply are murdered in wars and other conflicts...If we do not cultivate that sensitivity and are incapable of putting ourselves in someone else' shoes, to feel vicariously, we fail as a democratic citizenry but we also fail as human beings.

This goal is achieved through education, as was already stated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948. Yet it is clear that an education exclusively dedicated to the training of technical teams, to economic and technological growth, is insufficient, even though it will produce competent professionals for social, economic, and productive development. And so it will be if the objective is to provide citizens with a combination of abilities essential to combatting the ills to which I referred before, such as obscurantism, post-truth, fake news, and an ethical insensibility in the face of the great moral dilemmas raised by bioengineering, genetic engineering, etc.

To achieve this type of citizenry, we must cultivate the critical ability to evaluate historic processes, economic development, social justice, and the complexities of the principal world religions. It is not enough to know these things, like the knowledge in an encyclopedia or a simple accumulation of facts; rather one must be able to comprehend them, to distinguish between trustworthy evidence and that which is not, to distinguish between truth and falsehoods. This is achieved by philosophical training and through critical education, in the humanities, in the traditional vein of American liberal arts colleges.

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This is the fundamental mission of the university. Indeed, as Drew Faust, former president of Harvard University, stated a few years ago: "Higher learning can offer individuals and societies a depth and breadth of vision absent from the inevitably myopic present. Human beings need meaning, understanding, and perspective as well as jobs. The question should not be whether we can afford to believe in such purposes in these times, but whether we can afford not to" (Instituto).

But teaching our students – both within the University and elsewhere – to think, to question, to exercise critical analysis, is neither easy nor cheap. It is not as easy as adding a simple "A" (for "Arts") to the concept of STEM, as I discussed before in reference to the EUA's critique of the renewed Agenda of the European Union. No, educating within the school of Socratic thought, which is fundamental to advancing in the comprehension of reality, requires a constant dialogue between the professor and his or her students. It also requires a low student/professor ratio, which allows the professor to read weekly the essays written by the students and to return them, annotated and corrected, in order to draw out of them the ability to think critically and question. A professor in a class of one or two hundred students delivering a lecture on Aristotelian ethics, or on the modernist novel, or on Baroque painting, does not accomplish much. That leads, as we know, to the accumulation of encyclopedic knowledge, not to a true education within the humanities.

In the final conclusion of her book *Not for Profit*, Nussbaum summarizes with these lines the challenge that are facing our democratic societies and our universities: "If we do not insist on the crucial importance of the humanities and the arts, they will drop away, because they do not make money. They only do what is much more precious than that, make a world that is worth living in, people who are able to see other human beings as full people, with thoughts and feelings of their own that deserve respect and empathy, and nations that are able to overcome fear and suspicion in favor of sympathetic and reasoned debate" (p. 117).

Mario Vargas Llosa also said as much in his acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2010: "A world without literature would be a world without desires or ideals or irreverence, a world of automatons deprived of what makes the human being really human: the capacity to move out of oneself and into another, into others, modeled with the clay of our dreams" (p. 12). This is the current great challenge for higher education, for research, and for science. We

must fight against post-humanism, post-truth, and the manipulation of science and technology, erroneously oriented toward economic benefit and a false expectation of social well-being.

It has now been almost a century since Ortega y Gasset stated with great forcefulness in his well-known essay *Mission of the University (Misión de la Universidad*): "Let us not be the dupes of science. For if science is the grandest creation of man, it is made possible, after all, by human life." ("No seamos paletos de la ciencia. La ciencia es el mayor portento humano; pero por encima de ella está la vida humana misma, que la hace posible".) Let us not forget either what Pedro Salinas, one of the greatest poets of the past century, said in his passionate defense of reading, of criticism, and of language in his book *El defensor*. Salinas examined the humanist challenge in terms of the historical obligation towards the cultural legacy inherited from our parents, which we must transmit to our children. And so this is the greatest challenge which we face at this moment within the University: the preservation and sharing of our cultural heritage and inherited values, while also promoting the creation of new areas of knowledge, of art, of scientific discovery; in short, of all that which makes us truly advance as human beings.

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